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On What's Right and Keeping Left: Or why geography still needs Marxian political economy

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Prologue

“In the heady days of Marxist geography, everybody wanted to brush with the economic. Now postgraduates often recoil from it; they see it as the preserve of anoraks.” (Amin and Thrift, 2000, 4).

“Some want to give Left geography marks for revolutionary content: presumably 7/10 in the 1960s and 1970s but only 4/10 now. How absurd.” (Amin and Thrift, 2005, 221).

“Recovering a sense of political economy is one of the most urgent tasks confronting economic geography.” (Martin and Sunley, 2001, 55).

“What Is To Be Done?” (Lenin, 1917).

Introduction

Over the years there has been quite a lively debate in the pages of *Antipode* as to the character of a progressive radical geography – both what it is and what it ought to be. Given *Antipode's* chosen mission, it comes as no surprise that a concern with the intellectual character of a progressive radical geography and its associated political strategies is constantly simmering on the back-burner and every now and again erupts as the heat is turned up and the pot boils over. Nor is it any surprise that this debate has increasingly come to focus on the place of Marxian political economy as the dominance that it held following its key role in the emergence of radical geography in the 1970s and 1980s has been progressively – or to be more accurate, in many ways regressively – challenged over the last two decades. This has revealed some quite sharply different views on this, both within “the Left” as well as between “the Left” and others (for example, see Smith, 1989; Folke and Sayer, 1991; Hadjimichalis, 1991; Sayer, 1992; and most recently, Amin and Thrift, 2005), although as the debate has gone on, deciding “what’s Left” has become more difficult as previously clear lines have become blurred¹. Broadly speaking, two things happened in the 1990s. Some of us continued to adhere to a Marxian political economy while acknowledging the lacunae within it and exploring its complementarity to other approaches as a way of filling them. Others continued to question its relevance from within the many “post-isms” that emerged and continued to seek further to erode the authority of Marxian political economy on both theoretical and political

¹ It is only fair to point out that the late 1980s/early 1990s exchange in *Antipode* was in part provoked by an earlier and more bitter debate in the pages of *Society and Space*, as David Harvey (1987) rounded on a variety of critics of Marxism within the social sciences (the immediate trigger was a scurrilous and thoroughly disreputable piece by Saunders and Williams, 1986) and in the process stepped heavily on several toes within geography, as the subsequent responses to his paper revealed only too clearly. Walker’s intervention in *Antipode* was an attempt “in an ecumenical spirit”: 135) to find some common ground for a broad Left project while strongly defending the centrality of Marxian approaches within it, and the responses to it were generally much more considered, tempered by the collapse of state socialism in the USSR and its satellite states in central and eastern Europe as well as by the resurgence of neo-liberalism in the UK and USA. At the risk of stating the obvious, I think it imperative that the contemporary debate avoids the sharp and personalized edge of that of the 1980s and follows the spirit of Walker’s intervention in recognition of the need both to recognize diversity within the Left and at the same time to find common ground in the search for a political Left strategy while acknowledging the continuing relevance of Marxism to this endeavour.

grounds. As a result, a fragile and uneasy sort of truce prevailed within an increasingly plural and fragmented human geography.

More recently, this provisional truce was rudely disturbed, but from a surprising direction, and with some odd consequences. This revolved around a debate upon the character of economic geography – both what it is and what it ought to be – stimulated by a polemical intervention by my good friends and old colleagues Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift's (2000)², triggered by what they saw as the dangers of economic geographers turning (again) to mainstream neo-classically inspired economics in response to the rise of the "New Geographical Economics" (Krugman, 1991; 2000) and an associated "New Economic Geography". I share these worries. They bemoaned the decline of interest of economic geographers in the concerns that were central to Marxian political economy, such as inequality and uneven development, and on this point I whole-heartedly agree with them. What was more surprising is that their proposed solution to revivify economic geography involved a turn to the cultural and social, to an emphasis on the socio-cultural constitution of the economy and a concern with the specific forms of practice through which capitalist organizations (re)produce themselves. Again, in so far as it went, I'd go along with this – but what I found much less plausible was their seeming indifference to political economy in general and to Marxian political economy in particular. Indeed, in so far as any consideration of Marxian approaches registered on their radar, it was only to seem to reject them out of hand. This seemed odd given their *crie de coeur* for economic geographers seriously to re-engage with issues of inequality and uneven development.

Thus far I've kept out of these debates, partly because there's a distinct sense of *déjà vu* to quite a lot of them, although I'm prepared to concede that this may simply be a reflection of advancing age and a continuing predilection,

² Deliberately or inadvertently, the title of their intervention bore a more than a passing resemblance to the title of an earlier article by David Harvey (1974), which again sought to challenge prevailing orthodoxies but in a very different way.

metaphorically at least, for a certain sort of rainwear – the bright red anorak in which I continue to feel very comfortable³. Now, however, I feel the need to say something about all this, not least because the most recent intervention by Amin and Thrift (2005) has once again called in to question the value of the Marxian tradition and suggested that Marxian political economy, “in its many forms”, is well past its sell buy date. As they put it (Amin and Thrift, 2005, 221): “In the recent past, the tradition of Left thinking that seemed most to typify the four values [that define a Left normativity] was Marxism (already, it should be added in its many forms). However, it is difficult to see how this position can be maintained any longer, not only because new approaches have been added to the repertoire of the Left, but also because a series of re-workings of the world have taken place; re-workings that require new political strategies and new political imaginations”,

I can agree that the world has been re-worked in various ways and that we need a variety of theoretical perspectives to grasp its complexity – but this is hardly news. Crucially, however, it remains a world driven by and to a considerable extent decisively re-worked by the logic of capital and capital accumulation and structured in deep and fundamental ways by the class structural capital/labour relation. And so while I can agree that awarding marks for the revolutionary content of Left geography is a dubious pursuit (absurd is maybe a bit harsh – and it'd be interesting to know who they see as doing the awarding in pursuit of this new disciplinary technology), I could not disagree more about the relevance of Marxian political economy to contemporary critical geography, theoretically and politically. Indeed, if the dismissive view espoused by Amin and Thrift were to prevail and critical geography and radical analysis abandoned their engagement

³ And in this respect I'm proud to join Trevor Barnes among the ranks of the anorak wearers, even though his was of a different colour: see Barnes, 2001.

with Marxian political economy “in its many forms”, they would undoubtedly be seriously disabled, with severe theoretical and political consequences⁴.

At this point, given that there is variety within the Marxian tradition rather than Marxism constituting a single unified approach, let me clarify how I understand Marxian political economy and the version of it that I wish to defend: this is an “open” approach to analysis and framing and answering questions that evolves as its complex object of analysis - capitalism and its geographies, with their emergent properties – contingently and tendentially evolves, rejecting the view of Marxism as a closed dogma that presumes a closed and reified view of the accumulation process and the trajectory of capitalist development (and if some choose to read it in that way, then that’s a problem with them rather than with Marxism). As Bob Jessop (2004, 161-2) expresses it, “all tendencies in capitalism are themselves tendential”, resulting in a “doubly tendential dynamic” that lies at the heart of the processes of capitalist development. Put another way, then by “open” in this context I mean a Marxian approach that is consistent with the approach of critical realism (see Sayer, 1984)⁵, acknowledging that there are necessary causal structures that define particular types of society but that societies encompass multiple causal structures, not all of which in this sense are necessary and not all of which are equally powerful. Moreover, the causal powers inherent in such structures can only be contingently realised in specific time-space contexts. As a result, there may be emergent effects that cannot readily be anticipated. While the causal powers inherent in the social relations of capital are pre-eminent and must be present in the sense that they define capitalist societies as capitalist, it does not follow that they have a determinate (let alone deterministic) influence on each and every occasion in shaping the economic geographies of capitalism. This is an important qualification, and one

⁴ As a result of such a sweeping and unqualified dismissal of all forms of Marxian political-economy, the baby may well disappear with the bathwater (although for some, such as Yeung (2001, 172) what I’d take to be the baby, Marxian political economy, others see as the bathwater).

⁵ As with Marxism, there have been – and continue to be – debates as to the character of critical realism and its relationship to other realist and non-realist approaches. For a recent example that partly intersects with the debates about economic geography, see Mäki et al, 2004.

worth making at the outset. That said, there are real dangers in abandoning the most powerful theoretical apparatus available to us to understand the varied geographies of capitalism, the (re)production of inequality and uneven development. As a result, some of you may detect a mildly polemical tone in some of what follows – and I make no apologies for this.

So by way of a beginning, I want to go back to the 1960s and recall the reasons why economic geographers then re-discovered Marxian political economy, as it seems to me that there's still something to be learned from that time – and this holds true for human geography for more generally - although given recent debates I choose here to develop it in the specific context of economic geography. Then I want to go on to consider the reasons why in its turn Marxian political economy – or at least certain strands and readings of it – became subject to critique, the alternatives that were then explored as part of this critique, and their relationship to Marxian political economy. Finally, I want to try to pull the argument together in a concluding section.

Some history of geographical thought from the 1950s and 1960s: the re-discovery of Marx by geographers

The prime focus of my concern here is the rise of spatial science and neo-classically inspired location theories and the reasons for the subsequent rapid turn from these to Marxian political economy. Geographers became interested in spatial science and location theory because, for the first time in a long time, they wished to engage seriously with the question of explaining the spatial patterning of human economies and societies, with the structure of the space economy as Isard (1956) put it – and it is easy, now, to forget just how important a move this was at the time in putting questions of explanation and theory firmly back on the agenda. The turn to Marxian political economy reflected a rapid recognition by some more critically-minded geographers of the explanatory limitations of what

only very recently had themselves seemed radically new and powerful approaches, of the under-socialised, impoverished explanatory content of spatial science and neo-classical location theories⁶.

It is worth emphasising that this is a critique that remains equally valid for the ‘New Economic Geography’ and the ‘New Geographical Economics’ of the 1990s (for example, Krugman, 1991; Martin, 1999; many of the contributions to the debate initiated by Amin and Thrift noted above; and in Clark et al, 2000, including Krugman), which remain essentially committed to methodological individualism and thinly socialised explanatory accounts. As Allen Scott (204, 483) has pointed out, “strictly speaking”, Krugman’s work and the work of others that it has inspired is not neo-classical, since it firmly eschews any notion of constant returns to scale and perfect competition. However, that said, it retains a strong kinship with mainstream economics by reason of its commitment to methodological individualism, full information utility-maximising individuals and profit-maximizing firms, and an exclusive focus on socially disembodied relations of exchange (Dymski, 1996). Indeed the rise of technically more sophisticated versions of the neo-classical location theory orthodoxies of the 1950s and 1960s ought in itself to act as a sharp warning to those committed to a critical and progressive geography. For it is indicative and symptomatic of an attempt to revive approaches that were then revealed as seriously flawed and limited in their explanatory power and sophistication. Their resurgence represents part of a broader assault on critical approaches in the social sciences and of an attempt by the proponents of the approaches of mainstream economics and their advocates in economic geography to re-occupy the space from which they were ejected by the rise of Marxian political economy, on the basis of both their theoretical inadequacy and shallowness and their pernicious and regressive political implications.

⁶ This re-discovery of the Marxian tradition was by no means confined to human geography. Indeed in political economy, development studies and sociology scholars such as Samir Amin, Baran and Sweezy, Lefebvre, Mandel and Poulantzas were at the forefront of this re-engagement. The events of 1968 and the Vietnam war helped create space for this renewed concern with a more radical social science.

In seeking to appreciate the continuing relevance of Marxian political economy, then, it is important to remember that the reason for turning to it was the need to get a better grip on social process, and the social grounding and relations of the economy, on what defined capitalist economies as capitalist. A central aspect of this was recognition of a need to get below and beyond the surface appearances of capitalist economies and their geographies to those structural relations and processes that had causal effectivity and that could help explain *why* capitalist economies and their geographies were as they were. This above all was the central issue. The concepts of value theory provided the tools to tackle it. Concepts such as mode of production, commodities and their exchange value and use value, labour-power and the labour process, and uneven development allowed a much more powerful understanding of the geographies of capitalist economies than had hitherto been possible. Extensions to include notions such as social formations and the articulation of modes of production allowed a more sophisticated understanding of the relations between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production, of the links between capitalist and non-capitalist and non-class social relations, and the ways in which these are subject to the real subsumption of capital, deepening understanding of the mosaic of uneven development at multiple spatial scales⁷. Without doubt, the most powerful and sophisticated version of this revived and enriched historical-geographical materialism emerged in 1982 with the publication of David Harvey's magisterial account of *The Limits to Capital* (recently re-considered in a major symposium in the pages of *Antipode*: see Castree et al, 2004).

As Doreen Massey (1995, 307), reflecting on developments a decade on since the publication of another of the major landmarks of the last four decades, *Spatial*

⁷ It is worth adding that more recent work has emphasised the ways in which a variety of social relations which are integral to capitalism (for example, of gender or ethnicity), along with their associated concepts of value and processes of valuation, have become deeply entangled with the capitalist production of value and the capital/labour class relation in which this is grounded. This encompasses both the enabling of specific forms of capitalist production and value creation and/or the appropriation of values produced under different social relations by those of capital (see Lee, 2005).

Divisions of Labour, was at pains to emphasise, the value categories of Marxian political economy are vital to understanding the economic geographies of capitalism⁸. She trenchantly argues that the law of value is useful for thinking through the broad structures of the economy and for forming the “absolutely essential basis for some central concepts – exploitation for instance”. Thus value theory describes a specific set of social relationships in which exploitation is a process of extracting surplus labour that can only be understood in the context of the wider social forms constitutive of capitalism as a system of commodity production. Value theory therefore helps elucidate the decisive social relationshipsspecific to capitalism and to the contemporary world.⁹

This is not to deny that certain aspects of value analysis continue to generate debate and disagreement – for example, the “transformation problem” and the relationship between values and prices (for example, see Rankin, 1987; Roberts, 1987). However, this apparent controversy is more illusory than substantive, based upon a conflation of qualitatively different price and value categories. As Massey (1995, 307) points out, attempts to use value theory as a basis for empirical economic calculation are misconceived and doomed to failure. Indeed, “the byzantine entanglements into which the ‘law of value’ has fallen make it ...unusable in any empirical economic calculus”. It is therefore important not to confuse values and prices conceptually or seek to equate empirical data measured in prices with theoretical constructs defined in terms of values. The significance of value analysis lies in the way in which it focuses attention upon class relationships and the social structures that they help to define. It is very difficult, not to say impossible, to see how else other than in terms of the labour theory of value that we can explain where profits come from and why the capital/labour relation remains the key to understanding the accumulation process that lies at the core of capitalist societies.

⁸ Nor was she alone in arguing this. Many other influential geographers also did so. For example, Dick Walker (1989, 136) stressed that “certain concepts such as class, exploitation, value and capital accumulation [offer] true insights into the nature of the present-day capitalist world”.

⁹ It is also worth pointing out that as a consequence there are things that value theory cannot deal with: for example, issues such as emotion and feelings cannot be captured in value categories.

The critique of Marxian political economy: exploring a variety of other theoretical positions in social sciences

No sooner had critical geographers begun to engage with the Marxian tradition than others began to criticise them on various grounds for so doing. These critiques were raised for a variety of reasons – which I will consider later – but for the moment let me simply record that they often depended on reading Marxian political economy in particular ways, for particular purposes. For example, reflecting a broader spirit of the times (perhaps most forcefully expressed by Thompson, 1978), geographers exploring the potential of Marxism were accused of structural determinism, although it was and is debatable as to the extent to which these accusations were justifiable (for example, I certainly don't read Harvey as a structural determinist, and he represented the forefront of the re-discovery of Marxism and the reconstruction of a materialist historical-geography of capitalism). For others, the source of critique lay in the "unscientific" character of Marxian political economy and its failure to translate its theories into mathematical languages. Clearly, Marxian approaches came in for criticism from a variety of perspectives that were themselves at times incompatible. Nonetheless, the effect of such varied critiques was to encourage geographers (among others) to explore other positions in the social sciences that were seen to put more weight on agency and that allowed fuller consideration of the variety of evolutionary paths and instituted forms of capitalism through time and over space and so on.

Agency, structure

In response to the criticism that Marxian political economy privileged structure at the expense of (individual or collective) agency, closing off space for agency and practice, geographers engaged with a range of positions in modern social theory

that sought to understand relationships between structure and agency, recognising the influence of each on the other but giving greater weight to agency in the explanation of social action (notably in Giddens' theory of structuration (1979; 1981; 1984; see also Thrift, 1983). In fact, Bourdieu (1977; 1981) incorporates a more nuanced conception of the co-determining relations between agency and structure that recognises the social constitution of structures and the structuration of agency¹⁰. This opened space for a subsequent range of approaches emphasising practice¹¹ but its more immediate effect was to focus attention upon relations between agency and structure.

As Lipietz (1993, 128) has put it, the increased emphasis on agency was at least in part a response to structuralist interpretations of Marxian political economy which "from Levi Strauss to Lacan everywhere 'pummels the subject'". However, it is important to stress that a structuralist reading is only one possible way of interpreting Marxian political economy and indeed, could be seen as a particular aberration of the 1970s and certain strands of French Marxism (Althusser, 1977; Althusser and Balibar, 1970), which (mis)interpreted by Thompson (1978) led to his "intemperate rejection of everything Althusserian" (Walker, 1989, 139). Whatever the rights and wrongs of the varying interpretations, the end result was

¹⁰ Bourdieu (1977, 72) argues that the structure of a particular constitutive environment produces "habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, as structured structures, that is, as principles of the generation of practices and representations which can be objectively regulated and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules". They are "objectively adapted to their goals without pre-supposing a consensus aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operation necessary to attain them, and being all this collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating actor of the conductor". Bourdieu (1981, 309) later made a critical point in insisting that habitus is "an analytic construct, a system of 'regulated improvisation', or generative rules that represents the (cognitive, affective and evaluative) internalisation by actors of past experience on the basis of shared typifications of social categories, experienced phenomenally as 'people like us'" that varies by and is differentiated between social groups". Crucially, however, "because of common histories, members of each 'class fraction' share similar habitus, creating regularities of thought, aspirations, dispositions, patterns of action that are linked to the position that persons occupy in the social structure they continually reproduce". While Bourdieu refers specifically to 'class fractions', commonality of experience and identity could as well be based on 'people like us' defined via other social attributes, such as ethnicity, gender or place of residence. Furthermore, historical processes of class formation will reflect the intersection of structures of class relations with those of other social structures (cf. Massey, 1995, 301-5).

¹¹ These could in due course be described as 'non-representational', although not in the 1980s.

to trigger a virulent backlash against structure and in favour of agency that was as one-sided as the position that it sought to critique.

However, as Anderson (1984) emphasises, there is a long history of a tension between the emphasis placed upon structural determination and the weight given to agency and practice that extends back to the origins of Marxian political economy itself. Indeed, the inner time and developmental logic of capitalism can be seen to reflect this irresolvable tension between agency and structure. As Bourdieu's approach makes clear, there is no inconsistency between consideration of issues of agency and practice and the concerns of a Marxian approach with the social determination of action and broader and deeper social structural relations. Moreover, there is a strong thread of work within Marxian political economy concerned with the labour process and the organisation of work as a process of people transforming nature via a range of mediating 'hard' and 'soft' technologies to produce socially useful things in the form of commodities that emphasises agency and practice (for example, Beynon, 1973; Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979). Seen in this light, the concern with elaborating what people do, how they do it and why they do it (since much of the labour process literature emphasises the way in which people contest the imperatives of capital) can be seen as neither more nor less than an elaboration of a basic and central tenet of Marxian political economy.

Evolution, institutions, regulation

Another set of alternative approaches explored by geographers such as Amin (1999), Dunford (1990), and MacLeod (1997) relates to various strands of heterodox political economy and a nexus of evolutionary (for example, Nelson and Winter, 1982), institutional (for example, Hollingsworth, 2000) and regulationist (for example, Boyer, 1990) approaches to political economy, often

linked to theorisations of the state (for example, Jessop, 1990; 2002)¹² and to concerns with the non-economic foundations and the socio-spatial “embeddedness” of the economy, the close relations among and co-constitution of the economic and non-economic. In some cases these have clearly identifiable Marxian roots (notably strands of regulationist approaches) while in others the origins lie more in explicitly non-Marxian approaches to political economy – which is indicative of the variety within as well as among these approaches.

Irrespective of this variability, the central concern of these approaches is to elucidate the spatially and temporally variable forms that capitalist economies and their development trajectories can take (Hudson, 2005b). As such, they seek to identify the variety of mechanisms and processes through which capitalist economies become possible, through which they are reproduced and through which their developmental and evolutionary paths can be steered in an attempt to avoid a variety of systemic crises (for example, of accumulation; fiscal; legitimation; or rationality: Habermas, 1976; O’Connor, 1973).

Once again, however, it is possible to argue that the development of such “middle range” theoretical concepts is neither more nor less than an elaboration and extension of existing concepts and ideas within Marxian political economy. Indeed, such “middle range” concepts, at a lower level of abstraction than those of value theory, have been developed within as well as outside a Marxian framework. For example, the Althusserian concept of social formation, cast at a lower level of abstraction than that of mode of production, is recognition that capitalist economies are constituted in ways that vary over time and space and allows a more subtle interpretation of the historical-geographical specificity of capitalist economies. Consideration of a wider range of evolutionary, institutional and regulationist approaches certainly allows for a fuller and more nuanced elaboration of these issues and of the uneven character of capitalist development

¹² Oddly, much of the more recent institutionalist literature has little if anything to say about the state however.

and *how* this is constituted but does so in ways that are consistent with key propositions within Marxian political economy. In short, and at the risk of some over-simplification, value theory explains *why*, but such approaches clarify *how* the uneven geographies of capitalism are constituted as they are. As such, they offer complementary approaches within pluri-theoretical account.

Culture and the “cultural turn”

A third development relates to the recent (so-called) “cultural turn” in economic geography, with a resurgence of emphasis on ‘cultural’ approaches to understanding economies and their geographies, although these approaches are far from uniform, broadly falling into ontological and epistemological concepts of a “cultural economy” (Ray and Sayer, 1999)¹³. Of these, the epistemological conception is the least problematic. This envisages the “cultural” as a “bottom up” method of analysis, complementary to a more “top-down” political economy, that focuses upon the meanings that social practices and relations have for those enmeshed in them. For “economic agents do not merely submit to the abstract category of ‘market’ or ‘the dull compulsion of economic relations’. Their economic world is rich in contested meanings regarding what constitutes the ‘market/state’, ‘private/public’, ‘competitiveness’ and so on, and the rules and conventions according to which they should operate” (Jessop and Sum, 2001, 98). Equally, it presumes a self-reflexive recognition by political economists that their theories are constituted as situated knowledges that are (re)produced in specific time/space contexts, a view that has considerable merit. However, as I have suggested above, it could reasonably be argued that Marxian political economy has always contained strands of both “bottom up” and “top down” approaches, with an enduring tension between the relative emphasis placed upon structure and agency (Anderson, 1984). Indeed, the issue is not one of

¹³ As Costis Hadjimichalis has forcibly pointed out to me, repairing the bridge linking the ‘cultural’ and the ‘economic’ is a very Anglo-American concern, whereas in much of Leftist scholarship in southern Europe and Scandinavia, this divide was never opened up and so did not require bridging in the same way.

cultural economy as a methodological complement to Marxian political economy but rather an acknowledgement that a Marxian approach encompasses both methodological strategies. As such, the space currently occupied by culture-economy divisions and reductions could be at least partially reconstructed by treating concepts such as competition, markets, products and firms as *both* lived realities *and* as formal categories (cf. Slater, 2002, 76).

On the other hand, suggestions that a growing “culturalisation” of the economy, in terms of both inputs to and outputs from production (see for example, Lash and Urry, 1994), has led to the economy becoming ontologically more cultural are misconceived and deeply problematic (Miller, 2002, 172-3). It is certainly true that in *some* respects economic practices have become more sensitive to cultural differences and that corporations are increasingly aware of this and indeed have helped promote it via advertising and in other ways as part of corporate strategies to enhance profitability. Economic geographers (along with other social scientists) have certainly become more interested in studying these issues. However, to some perhaps considerable extent, this “cultural turn” in corporate practice is also an effect of the growing concern with these issues and the discursive construction of new forms of “economy” on the part of business consultants, various “Think Tanks” and journalists, as well as academics in Business Schools (Thrift, 2005).

Indeed, this growing interest and proliferation of writing may be leading to a mistaken belief that these practices are more novel than they actually are. It is worth recalling Stuart Hall’s (1991, 20) observation that “we suffer increasingly from a process of historical amnesia in which we think [that] just because we are thinking about an idea, it has only just started”. This comes as a sharp reminder of the need for eternal vigilance to avoid the dangers of such amnesia and of conflating changes in academic fad and fashion with changes in the economy and its practices. In any case, the growth of corporate concern with “culture” – and the growing employment of anthropologists, cognitive psychologists and

sociologists to deepen corporate understanding of these issues – is not new¹⁴ and is neither more nor less than part of capital's enduring concern to raise productivity, increase sales and speed up the pace of accumulation more generally. In contrast, the task of critical geographers is to disclose and contest such moves rather than participate and glory in them.

Moreover, it is also important to acknowledge that, ontologically, Marxian political economy was – and is – sensitive to issues of cultural difference in the constitution of the economy in general and the capitalist economy in particular. Not least, this is the case in terms of its sensitivity to spatial difference and uneven development¹⁵. The concepts of mode of production and social formation point precisely to this cultural and institutional constitution of capitalism as distinct from other modes of production and of varied capitalisms. What is required, therefore, is to develop a culturally sensitive political economy that begins from the assumption that the economy is - necessarily – always cultural but one that is always alert to the power geometries and dynamics of political economy. Recently, Bob Jessop (2004), building on earlier work (Jessop and Sum, 2001) has further elaborated this point in arguing for a Marxist-inflected cultural political economy by exploring the constitutive role of semiosis – the inter-subjective production of meaning - in economic and political activities and institutions and the social order more generally. He argues that cultural political economy is a “post-disciplinary” approach that adopts the “cultural turn” in economic and political inquiry without neglecting the articulation of semiosis with the inter-connected materialities of economics and politics within wider social formations. This suggests a fruitful way of further elaborating Marxian political economy in a “post-disciplinary” context that speaks clearly to and is in sympathy with its “pre-disciplinary” origins.

¹⁴ Consider, for example, the use of advances in psychology in the 1920s and 1930s in advertising to construct new subjects (Williams, 1980) and Ford's establishment of its own corporate Sociology Department (Beynon, 1973).

¹⁵ It is worth noting that Marxian scholars have also been sensitive to issues of ethnicity and gender but have insisted that these be seen as related to – though not reducible to – class (see below).

Weighing things up: towards a synthesis?

In summary, the strengths of the various approaches explored in the wake of Marxian political economy lie in the fact that they allow a fuller understanding of the varied culturally and socially embedded forms that capitalist economic development can take, of how different forms of capitalism develop within the structural parameters of the capitalist mode of production which Marxian political economy allows us to establish quite precisely. That said, it is also important to be aware of the dangers that engaging with such approaches may bring without due care and attention to their potential weaknesses and the inflections that they may give to understanding of the economy. For example, Gibson-Graham (1996, 206) announces that “the way to begin to break free of capitalism is to turn its prevalent presentations on their head”. As Allen Scott acerbically points (Scott, 2004, 491): “Presto. Not even a hint about a possible transitional programme ... The claim is presented in all its baldness, without any apparent consciousness that attempts to break free of any given social system are likely to run into the stubborn realities of its indurated social and property relations as they actually exist.” In arguing for a serious consideration of culture but against the “cultural turn”, Scott (2004, 491) goes on to suggest that quite apart from its “dysfunctional depreciation of the role of economic forces and structural logics in economic geography, the cultural turn also opens a door to a disconcerting strain of philosophical idealism and political voluntarism in modern geography”¹⁶. It is precisely such economic forces and structural logics that shape the “often brutal

¹⁶ Scott alludes here to what can be referred to as the rise of the “post-modern turn” which denied that theory and explanation were possible in any case. It is one thing to acknowledge a “crisis of representation”, quite another altogether to accept the nihilism of post-modernism and the view that “anything goes”, with all of the political implications that follow from this. In this context, I think it important to acknowledge that Amin and Thrift, for all their enthusiasm for theoretical and political variety “do not wish to defend an undifferentiated pluralism - - a kind of free-for-all Left politics which is nothing more than an agonized liberalism” (Amin and Thrift, 2005, 237).

economically dominated world” (Sayer, 1997, 25). And it is precisely such forces and logics that Marxian political economy allows us to understand better.

At the end of the day, then, the key point is that Marxian political economy is still needed to provide answers to the ‘why’ questions about capitalist economies, to reveal the inner mechanisms that drive the accumulation process that lies at the heart of the spatial and temporal dynamics of the economy and that delineate the limits to capital. In addition, and importantly, Marxian political economy has an ethical and moral register that foregrounds issues of inequality and injustice and the ways in which these differentially affect people and places. Indeed, this ethical and moral concern with inequality and injustice is central to it. We continue to need Marxian political economy in order to address these issues of inequality and to grasp the ‘why’ and not just the how, what and where of capitalist economic geographies. Put another way, we discard Marxian political economy at our peril, both theoretically and politically.

One attempt to acknowledge this while responding to some of the 1970s criticisms of lack of scientific rigour was to produce mathematised versions of a Marxian political economy of the space economy (Barnes and Sheppard, 1989), echoing the approach to mathematising Marxism developed by Morishima (1973; Morishima and Catephores, 1978)¹⁷. While an impressive intellectual achievement in itself, this inevitably lead to the omission of consideration of a range of qualitative influences and processes that were not amenable to treatment in this way and in my judgement conceded too much to the critics (although see Plummer and Sheppard, 2001).

As to other suggested alternative approaches, they describe and to a degree account for the variety in forms of capitalist development. There is no inevitability

¹⁷ Perhaps it was also influenced by the emergence of “analytic Marxism”, with its game theoretic approach (for example, Elster, 1985). However, such “analytic Marxism” approaches resort to a methodological individualism that is very much at variance with the traditions of Marxian political economy.

to the ways in which capitalism and its economic geographies evolve and it is vital to be able to comprehend how and why the space-time trajectories of capitalist development, its historical geographies of uneven development, take the forms that they do. This is fine as far it goes but it doesn't go far enough. For the key point is that these remain forms of *capitalist* development – and Marxian political economy remains absolutely essential if we are properly to understand the basic structural parameters and limits to capital within which this variety is necessarily played out. This was spelled out in unrivalled fashion by David Harvey in *The Limits to Capital* (1982) and this analysis remains as – if not more – relevant than it did in the early 1980s¹⁸.

Conclusions

Let me begin the summing up by seeking to specify the reasons why many geographers turned their face against the critical and radical tradition of Marxian political economy. In short, we can identify three sorts of reasons.

Firstly, a genuine concern with the explanatory and theoretical limitations of various readings of Marxian political economy, arising from the perception of conceptual and ontological lacunae within it and concerns about its epistemological and methodological approach. For example, critics claimed that Marxian analyses were pre-occupied with class divisions and class-based identities and neglected other dimensions of social division and identity such as ethnicity and gender. While some sought to address these problems from within the Marxian tradition (as indeed had been the case for some time: for example, see Hartmann, 1979), others saw them as a reason to explore non-Marxian alternatives in the belief that these would provide more powerful and less problematic explanations.

¹⁸ As Noel Castree (2005) has recently emphasised, however, this is a necessary and not sufficient condition in terms of political strategy: there are limits to theory as well as to capital.

Secondly, disciplinary sociologies – newly qualified geographers felt the need to carve out and define their own intellectual territory, to “do something different” from the existing orthodoxies and the old lags that peddle them (as some of us felt about neoclassical location theories and theorists in the late 1960s and early 1970s as we discovered Marxian political economy). This is neither surprising nor necessarily unwelcome. After all, the engagement of differing and conflicting ideas is what drives forward understanding and theory, as long as – and this is a key caveat – this is not simply a fashion effect and change for the sake of change because “novelty is often valued for its own sake” (Mäki, 2002, 130). However, it seems to me that quite a lot of the recent history of human geography can be convincingly – and disturbingly - accounted via a narrative of novelty for its own sake; it has an authentic ring of truth. Indeed, “novelty for its own sake” could well be the leitmotif for the last decade or two and this is - or at least it ought to be - a matter for some concern.

Thirdly, political correctness and “insidious careerism” (Walker, 1989, 151) – for some, engagement with Marxian political economy was seen as overtly political, and while no more so than an adherence to theories that underpinned orthodox conservative and right-wing positions, was always likely to be a contested position in capitalist societies. This was particularly so with the rise of neo-liberalism from the 1970s, which in itself both registered and engendered disarray among the political Left. For some, being seen to be Marxist was undoubtedly perceived as a career threatening move while for others having a go at Marxism was one way of establishing one’s credentials as a safe bet, as “one of us” as Mrs. Thatcher might have put it.

No doubt these – and other motives – became entangled in particular ways in particular cases, but the net result was that Marxian political economy became subject to a range of criticisms, as much from within as from outside “the Left” as the pages of *Antipode* have revealed in some detail, and as a result no longer

had the air of authority that it once had. At the risk of repetition, let me be very clear about one point: I am certainly not claiming that Marxian political economy holds the answer to all the questions, theoretical and political, that we seek to resolve. To claim that it did would be to represent it as a totalising system and to over-extend its analytic reach. There are many aspects of capitalist political economies and societies and their geographies that require different theoretical perspectives and approaches. For example, issues of consumption (as opposed to exchange), as commodities become use values for those who have purchased them, fall into this category, as do those aspects of human and social life that remain beyond the reach of processes of commodification¹⁹. Theoretical variety and complementarity are required precisely because of the complexity of the political economic geographies of capitalism (cf. Dow, 2002; Mäki, 2002) and in recognition of the fact that “the concrete spatial world [is] a synthesis of many determinations ... the outcome of a multiplicity of social dynamics operating at different levels” (Perrons, 2001, 211). I agree with this stance and have argued for a pluri-theoretical approach that includes a range of other approaches as well as Marxian political economy precisely because of the complexity of and variety within capitalist economies (for example, see Hudson, 2001; 2004; 2005a)²⁰. As such, I have no difficulty with Amin and Thrift’s (2005, 226) suggestion that we need to “allow many different theories of capitalism to flourish (from institutional and evolutionary economics to more modest experiments in cultural economy” though I have more difficulty than them with “the current obsession with Spinozian immanence”. What I would insist on, however, is that if we are to let a thousand theoretical flowers bloom, then the hardy perennial of Marxian political

¹⁹ Indeed, analysing and understanding such processes and their spaces may provide important insights into ways of resisting or transforming capitalist relations in spaces on the margins of, or in the interstices of, the mainstream capitalist economy (for example, see Amin et al, 2002; Leyshon et al, 2003). But it is also important to recognise such alternatives and their spaces for what they are – and as things stand, they are diverse fragments that in no sense constitute a serious challenge to the mainstream, and indeed in some ways their existence may unintentionally help legitimate it, held up as evidence of tolerance of variety and difference by those in dominant positions.

²⁰ Taking a different but related tack, others have suggested the need for a synthesis of different approaches (for example, Castree, 1999), “in full cognizance of the reductionist dangers that it opens up” (Scott, 2004, 492) but starting from a recognition of the existence of multiple theoretical perspectives.

economy must be one of them and economic geography – and indeed human geography more generally - requires a continuing serious and open engagement with it “in its many forms” if it is to keep a radical and critical edge.

Understanding the spatialities and temporalities of capitalist economies requires that we continue to recognise the value of Marxian political economy in helping understand *why* they are capitalist, the class structural relation that defines them as capitalist, and the limits to capital that constrain what is possible in such societies. A failure to acknowledge this seriously weakens *any* Left political strategy. On the other hand, it is also the case that while this class relation is decisive in defining of capitalist societies as capitalist, it certainly is not dominant in many empirical instances and a failure to acknowledge also this seriously weakens *any* Left political strategy. Of course there are many other dimensions of identity other than class (age, ethnicity, gender, nationality and so on) that are dominant in particular contexts – whether they become the basis of unity and collective action or division and conflict remains a contingent matter – and, while often related to and inflected by class, these certainly cannot be reduced to class.

As Walker (1989) points out, however, while post-Marxist (I’d prefer non-Marxist but let’s not split hairs) studies have thrown fresh light on issues such as patriarchy and racism, they lack a real radical edge precisely because, at best, they establish tenuous links with economic realities and the power of dominant classes. Indeed, the complex interplay of class with non-class dimensions of identity results in the formation of complex political subjects that refuse to fit into class structural categories as the structural classes of capital and labour are riven by a variety of cleavage planes. However, while there are multiple cleavage planes that run through both the structural classes, these typically run more deeply, widely and numerous through the structural class of labour than that of capital, disabling any attempt by the former to act as a class “for itself” and so posing a political challenge in terms of establishing bases for collective action

that challenges the imperatives of capital. Recognition of this complexity and the resultant often-subtle socio-spatial divisions is central to any attempt to forge practical Left political strategies; to pretend otherwise is naively idealistic, at best.

Nonetheless, as I have suggested above, there is worrying evidence of an apparent tendency to dismiss and deprecate the value of all versions of Marxian approaches, as the recent intervention by Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift illustrates. This is unfortunate since it seems to me that there are many others (myself included) who would wish to argue for versions of Marxism that are entirely consistent with the suggestion that they make (2005, 221) that our “guiding principle” should be “the promotion of emergence through the process of disagreement”. It seems to me entirely correct to argue that “the internal dynamics of capitalism” have evolved in complex ways and that “it becomes increasingly difficult to read off determinate outcomes” (Amin and Thrift, 2005, 225 – but isn’t this what a sophisticated and non-deterministic Marxian political economy *always* recognised?²¹ By the same token, however, the object of analysis remains capitalism and in that context Marxian political economy continues to offer absolutely essential theoretical tools and concepts that are needed to understand capitalism and the limits to capital. It is one thing to recognise the existence of dynamism and variety within the structural limits of capitalist social relations, quite another to pretend that we can grasp and properly comprehend these while abandoning the insights that Marxian political economy provides in precisely delineating the parameters of and limits to capital. Indeed, while recognising that other social relations can have important determinate effects, it is vital to acknowledge that the domination of capital has both significantly deepened and extended over the last two decades (Harvey, 2003; Arrighi, 2005).

²¹ Equally, I have no problem with the observation that capitalist development has been shaped by “new articulations with non-capitalist social formations”. I would merely observe that social formation is a good Althusserian concept and that there is a long Marxian history of analysing the articulation of capitalist and non-capitalist social formations.

Despite assertions to the contrary, then, neither History nor Geography have ended and we continue to live in a capitalist world, dominated by capital. Certainly, this is a complex world and as a result we need a variety of theoretical perspectives in seeking to understand it and varied political strategies within a broad Left project as we seek to change it for the better. As it remains a capitalist world, however, in the last instance the class structural power of capital asserts itself as decisive. Whether it ought to be decisive is of course another question. When it fails to be so, then capitalism will have been eclipsed, although there is no sign that this is immanent. In the meantime, however, simply trying to wish away the structural power of capital is a curious theoretical and political strategy for those on the Left – and one that is doomed to fail at the outset as the basis for a radical and emancipatory politics. And as long as it remains the case that we are grappling with the economic geographies of capitalism, we – as critical geographers and radical citizens, who want to engage with both the “small” issues of injustice in everyday life and local places and the “big” issues of global socio-spatial inequality and uneven development – have a deep and enduring need for Marxian political economy. That simple fact is staring us in the face. How absurd to pretend otherwise.

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